

Long-term Irrigated Lands Regulatory Program Background

In 2003 the California Regional Water Quality Control Board, Central Valley Region (Regional Water Board) adopted a conditional waiver of waste discharge requirements for discharges from irrigated agricultural lands. As part of the 2003 waiver program the Regional Water Board directed staff to prepare an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for a long-term irrigated lands regulatory program. The 2003 interim waiver program was set to expire in 2006. In 2006, the Regional Water Board adopted a new conditional waiver for discharges from irrigated agricultural lands that continued the 2003 interim program until 2011. In the 2006 conditional waiver, the Regional Water Board reaffirmed the goal to develop a long-term program and EIR.

Under the 2003 waiver program, the Regional Water Board collected water quality and other data and developed a draft Existing Conditions Report (ECR) for Central Valley Irrigated Agricultural Lands. The ECR was developed to establish baseline conditions for estimating potential environmental and economic effects of long-term program alternatives in an EIR and other associated staff analyses. The draft ECR was circulated for public review in 2006. The Regional Water Board's contractor (ICF Jones & Stokes) and staff are revising the ECR to address the comments received and also to include the information necessary to conduct a programmatic EIR for the long-term program. The final ECR is scheduled for completion before the end of 2008.

CEQA Scoping Meetings

In March and April 2008, Regional Water Board staff conducted a series of CEQA scoping meetings to get recommendations on the scope and goals of the long-term program. Also, staff gathered public input on how stakeholders would like to be involved in the development of the long-term program. At these meetings staff learned that stakeholders wished to be actively involved in the development of a long-term program. To address this interest, the Regional Water Board held the first long-term program Stakeholder Advisory Workgroup meeting on October 9, 2008.

Advisory Workgroup and the Long-term Program

The next steps involved in developing a long-term program include defining the "project." In this context, the "project" is a long-term regulatory program for agricultural lands. However, there are a number of options or alternatives that could be considered viable regulatory programs. A number of concepts were discussed during the CEQA scoping meetings and need to be further explored to determine whether they are viable. The Advisory Workgroup will provide feedback to staff on proposed alternatives and develop recommendations regarding program alternatives.

Viable program alternatives need to be objectively evaluated to determine a recommended alternative, or in the context of CEQA: to define the “project.” Evaluation measures will most likely include: potential environmental benefits/impacts, costs, and feasibility. The Advisory Workgroup will also help to develop a set of evaluation measures and provide feedback on how the evaluation measures are applied to the alternatives.